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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 1895
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 3807
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 4883

S E C R E T AMMAN 000612

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FOR NEA/ELA; FOR DRL/IRF
FOR NSC - PASS TO MIKE SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: EVANGELIZING, PROSELYTIZING, AND SHEEP-STEALING IN
JORDAN

REF: AMMAN 104

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The GOJ's recent expulsion of a number of missionaries (reftel) has provoked a media and political firestorm, exposing major rifts between the Christian communities in Jordan and generating a highly defensive tone on the part of the government. The "traditional" churches of Jordan seem to be taking advantage of the dust-up to consolidate their status and eliminate rivals for Christian adherents. The evangelicals, meanwhile, fearful of upsetting their precarious position in Jordanian society, are carefully considering their next response, but have concerns about their role in the future of a pluralistic society. The Ambassador will continue to press Jordan's leaders to reverse the course and repair the damage to their images of religious tolerance, and permit missionaries to conduct lawful and legitimate activities. END SUMMARY.

Churches in Jordan

12. (SBU) According to Jordanian law, churches may be recognized by royal decree or through government registration. In Jordan, 11 "traditional" churches (including the Greek Orthodox, the Catholic, the Armenian Orthodox, and the Coptic churches) operate under a royal decree. In addition, five evangelical churches are registered with the Ministry of Justice: the Evangelical Free Church, the Assemblies of God, the Baptist Church, the Christian Missionary Alliance, and the Nazarene Church. Each church maintains its own regulations and by-laws concerning its governance, and files its constitution with the MOJ. Traditional churches also operate courts that provide legally binding rulings in personal status issues (e.g., divorce, custody, and inheritance) for their members. In contrast, evangelicals must petition the court of a traditional church (or nominally convert) to have their cases heard.

Roots of the Evangelical-Orthodox Debate

13. (C) There is no love lost between the Jordanian orthodox and evangelical communities. Orthodox Christians describe the evangelicals as "missionaries," "Zionists," "proselytizers," and "sheep/flock stealers." Evangelical leaders respond that the Orthodox communities are dying out because they are more focused on ritual than on teaching scripture; the evangelicals see themselves as filling that

void. Note: Some voices within the traditional community agree, to a point; Awdeh Quwas - formerly holder of a Christian set-aside parliamentary seat in Amman - blamed the "weak administration" of the traditional churches, which exclude young members from participation, as a root cause of their membership erosion woes. End note. Furthermore, because conversion from Islam is prohibited, Orthodox Christians are fighting, not to expand, but merely to maintain their historic communities against what they see as evangelical poaching. They perceive the evangelicals as targeting their followers and the West as complicit in depleting their congregants through immigration.

¶4. (SBU) Evangelical leaders cite their contributions to Jordanian society - schools, clinics, medicine, even work with Iraqi and Palestinian refugees - as positive aspects of their presence in Jordan that are often overlooked by their detractors. Nor are all evangelicals newcomers; evangelical churches preceded the formation of the Jordanian state, with the Christian Missionary Alliance, the oldest of Jordan's evangelical groups, arriving in the late 19th century, and the Nazarene Church claiming regional roots dating back more than 80 years. Estimates of the number of evangelicals in Jordan vary greatly. According to Nazarene Reverend Afif Halaseh, the evangelicals number about 7,000 adults, and, if aggregated, would represent the third largest church in Jordan, behind the Greek Orthodox and the Catholics respectively. Awdeh Quwas (member of the World Council of Churches), however, told emboffs there could not be more than 3,500 "new Anglicans" (his term for evangelicals).

¶5. (C) While technically not outlawed by the Jordanian penal code, proselytizing is a sticky subject. The government does not permit proselytizing of Muslims, fearing the strain it places on Jordan's social fabric. Conversion from Islam

(Jordan's official religion) would be apostasy, a crime punishable by death under the severest interpretations of shari'a. While this has not happened in Jordan, the government is keen to avoid generating tensions between Christians and Muslims. Former MP Quwas reminded poloffs that conversion is a "very sensitive social topic," and recalled efforts within the Christian community to establish guidelines for interfaith (Christian-Muslim) marriages. Many Orthodox Christians believe their community faces far more serious challenges related to coexistence and emigration that are hardly offset by gaining the occasional Muslim through proselytizing.

¶6. (C) Evangelicals and missionaries interviewed by emboffs say they don't proselytize. Instead, they say they discuss their faith with anyone who expresses interest. Several evangelical contacts have implored emboffs to help them define the line between discussing their faith and proselytizing. When asked directly, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS) Director Imad Shehadeh responded that "evangelicals could do things more wisely," and remarked that some are moving too quickly to institutionalize their churches. He defended, however, their right to discuss their faith, citing the King's uncle, Prince Hassan, as having articulated the view that Christians and Muslims can engage in "conversation, not conversion." Other missionaries assert that their aid comes with a Christian message, and that proselytizing is only done within defined limits: "We give people food and tell them that Jesus told us to feed the poor. If they want more information, then we pursue it with them privately. We are not out on the streets handing out tracts." Others, however, are less circumspect about their activities and aspirations. Halaseh confided that within five years, he expected the Evangelicals would become the second largest "church" and, within ten years, the largest. Halaseh explained the expansion as a natural outcome of winning converts from the traditional churches by focusing on younger, disaffected Christians. He told poloff, "let's not kid ourselves, Muslims are coming over, too. It puts me to shame that we can't share our faith."

¶7. (C) On January 29, Compass Direct News published an online article describing the challenges faced by evangelical Christians and missionaries in Jordan. Citing 27 deportations and residency refusals over the preceding year, American journalist Peter Lamprecht (an alias) met with several of those refused residency, evangelical Christian leaders, foreign embassy representatives, and Minister of State for Media and Communication Nasser Judeh. In conversations with emboff, Lamprecht acknowledged the delicacy of the issue and expressed fears of prompting retribution against evangelicals and missionaries. Lamprecht said he came to Jordan (he is based in Turkey) at the request of Jordanian Evangelical church leaders who had feared the recent spate of deportations (reftel) as a harbinger of further troubles to come. Given the sensitivity of the issues, he left Jordan uncertain whether Jordanian Evangelicals would support his drawing attention to their cause. Following publication, Orthodox leaders complained that Lamprecht had not sought their perspective, nor published pictures of functioning Jordanian churches (i.e., not closed by the government as Lamprecht alleged) in his report.

¶8. (C) In response to Lamprecht's article, four members of the Jordanian Council of Bishops (representing the Amman-based bishops of the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Roman Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches) penned a letter on February 4 extolling the 2,000 year old "traditional" Jordanian Christian communities and blasting the "foreign missionary groups that come to Jordan under social, educational, or cultural cover." The traditional bishops challenged the legitimacy of these groups as "churches," accused them of proselytizing, and concluded that they had "become a threat to public security." Note: The threat supposedly arises from undermining the delicate balance between Jordan's Muslim and traditional Christian communities. If the historical relationship is damaged, the logic goes, extremist Muslims might take matters into their own hands, threatening and targeting those they view as Evangelical proselytizers, which could lead down the slippery slope to threats against other Jordanian Christians. End

note.

¶10. (S) Sources differ on why the Council published this letter, with much speculation that one body or another of the GOJ had a hand in encouraging a response that would defend Jordan against the implied accusations of limiting religious freedom. Halaseh believed the Prime Minister summoned the Council to his office; Lamprecht suggested that the Royal Court had a hand in the affair; and Council of Bishops General Secretary John Nour (ironically, himself an evangelical) admitted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested their reply but gave varying accounts of the degree of pressure they faced from the MFA. Former MP Quwas cited the public silence of the individual bishops as evidence that the bishops acted under GOJ pressure. Father Nabil Haddad (protect) (a Melkite Catholic), on the other hand, only blamed the Catholic and Melkite bishops for their "hatred" of evangelicals. Comment: The letter was inspired by senior Jordanian officials, but the Church authorities no doubt relished the opportunity to opine on this matter. End Comment.

¶11. (C) Bishop Nour went on to suggest that the bishops meant no affront to Jordanian Evangelicals, and said the letter was "one hundred percent misunderstood." Nour complained that the problem stems from missionaries who were "kicked out" and ran to the foreign media. He denied that any "clean" (e.g., registered) churches had been closed, and took offense at what he perceives as a slanderous ad hominem campaign being waged by evangelical leaders against him. Father Haddad, a key voice in the effort to promote coexistence, was less kind, privately slamming the bishops' words to poloff as "the lousiest statement ever" and "un-Christian," and remarking

that it "lacked wisdom, love and respect." Haddad claimed these bishops (including his own) did not represent the broader Christian community in Jordan.

The Public Debate Sheds Much Heat and Little Light

¶12. (SBU) The bishops' letter pushed the issue into the forefront of Jordanian political consciousness - reaching the front pages of major Jordanian dailies Al-Rai and the inside pages of Al-Ghad and the Jordan Times. Very quickly the debate began to take on darker tones. Columnist Fahd Khitan described the missionary activities as the "intellectual spearhead for suspicious Zionist-US parties . . . in an attempt to sow sedition and division." Awdeh Quwas appeared on Al-Jazeera's "Behind the News" on February 16 and accused groups of "infiltrating the Jordanian society to cause harm to intra-Christian relations and Christian-Muslim relations." Quwas claimed that these missionary groups were American-financed, and accused them of using their resources to exploit the social weaknesses of poor and sick Arabs.

¶13. (SBU) In a February 25 meeting with poloffs, Quwas - a self-described "open Christian, not a blue blood Orthodox" - acknowledged that Christians are "few in number, but united." Quwas called the Compass News article "all wrong" and defended government actions to limit the activities of JETS - which he noted was not a university. Quwas said he believed the Council of Bishops statement came "too late" and should have been issued a decade ago, but asserted that previous cabinets had relented to pressure from U.S. leaders to allow missionary activity in Jordan.

¶14. (U) Parliament debated the topic and issued a statement endorsing the letter on February 20. Before Parliament, Acting Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communications Nasser Judeh admitted the GOJ's deportation of Christian missionaries operating illegally in Jordan. According to press reports, Judeh commended the bishops' response; several MPs then called upon the government to take further action against proselytizing missionaries. Adding their voice to the chorus, in a February 20 statement the Islamic Action Front - the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's political party in Jordan and the only political party of note in the Parliament - called for the GOJ to revoke the license of missionary groups posing as charities.

Evangelical Reaction

¶15. (C) Jordanian Evangelicals are nervous. For the past six months, many have complained to emboffs about increasing pressure - including deportations and residency refusals - from official channels (reftel), and they see the latest developments as further evidence of growing official hostility to their activities. During a February 24 meeting to discuss the recent events, Reverend Halaseh described the deportation of two Egyptian evangelicals from Aqaba to Nuweibeh and the recent sealing of his church in Aqaba by GOJ officials due, nominally, to a zoning dispute with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA). Regional press further reported on February 20 the arrest of foreign missionaries for proselytizing in the Shuna valley - Jordan's primary agricultural area in February. Halaseh explained this by saying that 300 Egyptian agricultural workers belong to the Nazarene Church in the valley and often worship in homes. He speculated that the head of the Coptic Church complained to government authorities, who, according to Halaseh, arrested the leaders, confiscated their work permits and threatened deportation unless they disbanded their prayer room. Halaseh also provided Emboffs a December 2007 letter from Prime Minister Dahabi's office to other ministries prohibiting the rental of old or new apartments for use as churches or mosques. He estimated that half of his churches use rented apartments to conduct their services. Halaseh contrasted this policy with land offered at Bethany (the

Baptism site on the Jordan River) to Orthodox churches for free.

¶16. (C) The evangelical community cites various other incidents in describing the difficult atmosphere. For example, a September 2007 effort by the Baptists to gain royal recognition of their church, and the King's permission to join the Council of Bishops, was derailed when the Greek Orthodox and Latin Orthodox (Catholic) bishops warned the government that if it extended recognition, the Baptists would be used as cover for foreign missionaries who would disturb the social fabric. Eric Henzel (protect), a professor at JETS, said that the faculty and students were already feeling the pressure as a result of students' being denied entry into Jordan for the current academic year. "We're more concerned that they would try and close us down through the back door - squeezing us shut by denying our students and faculty entry into Jordan." Henzel hoped that the current firestorm is just a passing wave of harassment rather than a more sustained campaign but, recalling the case of an Egyptian pastor who was taken from his home in the middle of the night and shipped off to Egypt via the Aqaba ferry, in spite of the willingness of his church to pay for a plane ticket back to Cairo, said, "the aim is to humiliate these people, to send a message".

Reaching out

¶17. (C) Shehadeh told poloff on February 20 that the 15-member Council of Evangelicals met for several hours the weekend of Feb 15-16 to discuss their next move. Given the increasing tensions, they intend to wait a week to "let things die down," and plan to then publish a letter in Jordanian newspapers explaining themselves and declaring their patriotism. Evangelical leaders emphasized that the upcoming letter would not react directly to previous accusations, and hoped to use it in an effort to gain greater acceptance from fellow Jordanians. In this context, Pat Hillman (a missionary who lives and works in Zarqa) (strictly protect) told poloffs that the Evangelical community in Jordan is in a tight spot. The foreign missionaries would like to weigh in, but see that the optics of such a move are less than favorable at a time when the community writ large is being accused of being non-Jordanian and having foreign sympathies. That leaves the onus on Jordanians and other Arabs in the community to respond, but many are afraid of doing so for fear that it could jeopardize either their residency status or personal security.

¶18. (C) Evangelicals with whom we talked also realized that they have done a poor job of building political alliances within Jordanian society, and see further outreach to orthodox Christians in Jordan as a new goal - one that they hope will lead to official recognition by the Middle East Council of Churches, which they see as a necessary step towards official sanction by the government of Jordan. While they pursue the path of reconciliation, the evangelical community has been prompted by the war of words to start documenting their trials and tribulations. At a meeting of

missionary organizations headed by Rick Shupp (strictly protect), pastor of the Amman International Church and the de facto coordinator of foreign missionaries in Jordan, the group resolved to develop a "deportation form" that they would use to keep track of expulsions and other interference by the Jordanian government in their operations.

Comment

¶19. (C) Prior to the outbreak of this debate, after raising the issue of the deportations (reftel), the Ambassador received positive signals from the highest level, with a clear intent to send a positive signal to the affected Christian community that they are not unwelcome in Jordan and reverse at least some deportations. This recent and highly visible political discussion significantly complicates the

situation. Evangelicals fear that the words of their fellow Christians give conservative elements of the government the cover to take action against them, while traditional church leaders remain unrepentant and expect Evangelical leaders to reach out to them to bridge the divide. Journalists and commentators continue to publish almost daily articles and op-ed's supporting the GOJ's actions and the bishops' letter, giving neither group the opportunity to lower the heat. The forthcoming publication of an Evangelical explanation, no matter how gracious the tone, is likely only to draw further ire from traditional church leaders and the public.

120. (S) The GOJ's security apparatus led by the GID is the driving -- and over-reaching -- force in this affair. Debates on sensitive topics such as religion are generally taboo in Jordan without a green light from government leaders. The uncommon step of publicizing the Bishops' statement on the Jordanian Embassy's website (later removed at our suggestion), Judeh's public defense in Parliament, and evidence that the GOJ has shared with the Council of Bishops its reasons for deporting missionaries (in our meeting with John Nour, he read to us from a GOJ document the same information we reported reftel), suggest the security apparatus is digging in its heels, defending its decision, and seeking cover from Jordanian institutions. The linkage between Christian missionaries and Zionism by Khitan, Quwas, and the IAF adds another unhelpful dimension to the issue. While the authorities may score some points within conservative elements of society, we have reminded them that Jordan risks losing far more by jeopardizing its image as a beacon of moderation and as a promoter of religious co-existence in the eyes of a broader global community. Once the dust settles, we will again urge Jordanian leaders to consider ways to repair the damage to their image of religious tolerance, by allowing missionaries to pursue legitimate and lawful activities.

HALE